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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 001197

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EUR ALSO FOR A/S FRIED AND DAS BRYZA

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TAGS: PREL PHUM KIRF OVIP AM

SUBJECT: CDA FINDS CATHOLICOS A CONSTRUCTIVE VOICE ON TOUGH
ISSUES: TURKEY, "GENOCIDE," AMBASSADORIAL CONFIRMATION

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Classified By: CDA R.V. Perina, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: CDA called on Armenian Catholicos Karekin II September 27 to discuss the church leader's five-week visit to the United States, which begins September 30. CDA conveyed that at the moment a meeting with President Bush appeared unlikely. The Catholicos expressed disappointment, remembering fondly his May 2001 meeting with the President, and noting he had hoped to discuss regional issues with President Bush. CDA found the Catholicos an engaging conversationalist, with a gentle wisdom and keen insights on often-neuraglic issues. He offered conciliatory words on the "genocide" issue, hoped earnestly for near-term reconciliation with Turkey, and spoke persuasively of the need for a confirmed U.S. Ambassador in Armenia. The pontiff also spoke disarmingly of his great fondness for the United States, noting that travel around America had been a great joy earlier in his life and career. See Paragraph 10 for recommendation. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians, heads the Armenian Apostolic Church worldwide, and will undertake a five-week pontifical visit to the United States starting September 30, visiting Armenian communities in 18 cities. (NOTE: Since the 1400s, there has been a rival Armenian Catholicos -- Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, based in Lebanon since 1930 -- which attracted the support of many Diaspora Armenians during the Soviet period. However, the Cilician Catholicos now acknowledges the seniority of the Armenian Mother See. Karekin II is widely honored by Armenians everywhere, despite Armenian churches' failure to reunite formally the two branches of the faith.
END NOTE)

ON TURKEY

¶3. (C) CDA mentioned U.S. efforts to promote rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey, and noted our guarded hopes that recent changes in Turkey may lead to progress. The Catholicos applauded this goal, noting that "every Armenian closely follows events in Turkey." The pontiff applauded the Armenian government's willingness to normalize relations with Turkey without preconditions -- a policy held despite some significant anti-Turkish constituencies in Armenia and the Diaspora. He said that such efforts must be supported, and work must be done to change public attitudes in Turkey and Armenia. He noted his own visit to Turkey last year, and

mentioned his favorable impression of (Greek) Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. The Catholicos commented that Bartholomew was a "true and courageous shepherd of his people" who could have a positive impact on Turkish public opinion over time.

ON "GENOCIDE" RECOGNITION

¶4. (C) The Catholicos expressed a surprising degree of acceptance of the need to be patient with Turkey's slowly-evolving position on the issue. "We must aspire to universal recognition and condemnation of the genocide, because that is the means to keep the world free of future such events. However, we also understand world political realities and the position of the American authorities. It is evident in the President's annual statement that the components of genocide are recognized, even if the word itself is not used. I hope that (use of the word) will one day happen. But I tell you we would not want that at the expense of global peace and security."

¶5. (C) The Catholicos said the world, governments and societies alike, must universally condemn acts of true evil, such as genocide, and punish the wrong-doers. But this condemnation must arise out of a genuinely felt understanding that must take hold among peoples. Mentioning also the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, the Catholicos said "I am intrinsically an optimist on all matters and all issues. I believe every problem has its solution. All that is needed is good will. We must look at these issues from a higher plane, and secure the best interests of all."

ON THE NEED FOR A CONFIRMED U.S. AMBASSADOR

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¶6. (C) CDA had opened the meeting with a discussion of his own status, and alluded to the challenges that had kept a permanent ambassador from coming to Yerevan this past year. The Catholicos replied that the "state authorities and people of Armenian put a great importance" on having a confirmed American ambassador, and he himself did as well. He said he believed that his "sons and daughters" in America were coming to understand this, despite the great emotionalism that had arisen over the former ambassador's statements. The Catholicos noted that an ambassador is the representative of a state, and must reflect the policy of that state. He predicted that "the next appointment surely will not face the same situation."

ON CHALLENGES FACING AN INTERNATIONAL FAITH

¶7. (C) The Catholicos said he was looking forward to the chance to visit America again. He noted that the Armenian Church in the United States has been instrumental in injecting renewal and reform energy into the worldwide church. He remarked that the Armenian Church, like others, was grappling with important issues of theology and social values, and there was often strong disagreement among branches of the faith in different corners of the world, where the faithful had embraced many divergent cultural values and "found their own solutions; some correct, some incorrect, all uncanonical" during the long Soviet-era isolation from the Mother See. The church had yet to find the means to bridge the divides that had grown up over the years, but he hoped visit would aid in reaching solutions to these questions.

ON HIS APPRECIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

¶18. (C) The Catholicos spoke with great fondness of his previous experiences in the United States, and of his May 2001 White House meeting with President Bush. He said the meeting had been scheduled to last 15 minutes, but had stretched to 45 minutes, because the President had prolonged the conversation by continuing to ask substantive questions. The Catholicos said that, trying to be respectful of the President's time, he had three times ventured to wrap up the meeting, but each time the President had launched a new topic to keep the conversation going. The Catholicos was disappointed to hear from CDA that at the moment it appeared unlikely that a White House meeting could be scheduled during this visit. CDA emphasized that it was simply a matter of scheduling. The Catholicos said he had hoped to discuss with the president regional challenges in the South Caucasus. CDA promised to convey the Catholicos' continued hopes for a meeting with President Bush at some point during the five-week visit.

¶19. (C) The pontiff said he had visited America more than 40 times, mostly when he was an archbishop charged with outreach to the American dioceses. On each visit, he had scheduled one week of pastoral business, followed by two weeks of personal travel exploring the United States, which he found fascinating in its richness and diversity. He said he had visited some 37 or 38 states, finding something unique and noteworthy in each one. He thanked the United States for the generous assistance it provides to the people and government of Armenia.

COMMENT AND RECOMMENDATION

¶10. (C) The Armenian spiritual leader presents very well. He combines youthful vigor, a sense of mission, genuine faith, and keen political/diplomatic insights, tempered by a long view about the controversies of the world. He is a persuasive and articulate speaker. He seems to have a sincere concern for the welfare of Armenians. We believe that he can be a positive voice regarding such issues as AGR, relations with Turkey, and confirmation of the next U.S. Ambassador to Armenia. A meeting with President Bush could have further encouraged the Catholicos to play such a helpful role. We recommend that, if at all possible, consideration still be given to such a meeting at some point during the Catholicos' five-week visit.

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